



*Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart, *Cultural Inquiry*, 2 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2011), pp. 323–37

ANTONELLA FRANCONI

## Transferring Dante

**Robert Rauschenberg's Thirty-Four Illustrations for the *Inferno***

CITE AS:

Antonella Francini, 'Transferring Dante: Robert Rauschenberg's Thirty-Four Illustrations for the *Inferno*', in *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart, *Cultural Inquiry*, 2 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2011), pp. 323–37 <[https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-02\\_19](https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-02_19)>

RIGHTS STATEMENT:

© by the author(s)

This version is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

**ABSTRACT:** In December 1960 the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York displayed a series of thirty-four illustrations of the *Inferno* by the avant-garde artist Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg had developed this project over the previous two years, working on it almost exclusively, first in New York City, and then in an isolated storage room in Treasure Island, Florida, where he retreated to concentrate on the last half of the cycle. When Rauschenberg decided to illustrate the *Inferno* in early 1959, his reputation in the New York art world was growing, although he did not achieve full recognition as the leading artist of his era until 1964, when he won the Venice Biennale International Grand Prize. But by the mid-1950s his works were shown in major galleries, and he had begun to be regarded as a major, if controversial, figure of the generation following Abstract Expressionism. As is well known, his Combines juxtapose found objects as diverse as stuffed animals, chairs, photographs, plastic, quilts, and pillows with paint, watercolour, and graphic signs. This refuse collected from the streets of New York was Rauschenberg's 'visual archive', his 'public act of collective memory', to borrow Rosalind Krauss's description in her discussion of the artist's shift to photography in the early 1960s. Just think of two celebrated pieces, *Bed* and *Monogram*, as examples of the artist's three-dimensional work of the 1950s: his own quilt and pillow (in the first case) and a stuffed goat with a tire around its [...]

# TRANSFERRING DANTE

Robert Rauschenberg's Thirty-Four Illustrations for the *Inferno*

Antonella Francini

La memoria è uno specchio in cui si riflette l'assenza ....  
crea lo spazio illusorio come schermo in cui si riflette il tempo.  
Piero Bigongiari

In December 1960 the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York displayed a series of thirty-four illustrations of the *Inferno* by the avant-garde artist Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg had developed this project over the previous two years, working on it almost exclusively, first in New York City, and then in an isolated storage room in Treasure Island, Florida, where he retreated to concentrate on the last half of the cycle.<sup>1</sup> When Rauschenberg decided to illustrate the *Inferno* in early 1959, his reputation in the New York art world was growing, although he did not achieve full recognition as the leading artist of his era until 1964, when he won the Venice Biennale International Grand Prize. But by the mid-1950s his works were shown in major galleries, and he had begun to be regarded as a major, if controversial, figure of the generation following Abstract Expressionism. As is well known, his Combines juxtapose found objects as diverse as stuffed animals, chairs, photographs, plastic, quilts, and pillows with paint, watercolour, and graphic signs. This refuse collected from the streets of New York was Rauschenberg's 'visual archive', his 'public act of collective memory', to borrow Rosalind Krauss's description in her discussion of the artist's shift to photography in the early 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Just think of two celebrated pieces, *Bed* and *Monogram*, as examples of the artist's three-dimensional work of the 1950s: his own quilt and pillow (in the first case) and a stuffed goat with a tyre around its middle (in the second) stand out as transfigured objects, visual allegories of his age. For, writes Krauss, 'it is exactly the notion of memory, or of any other private experience which paintings might have formerly expressed, that is redefined by these pictures. The field of memory itself is changed from something that is internal to something that is external.'<sup>3</sup> Leo Steinberg first suggested a connection between the surface of Rauschenberg's works and the mind itself

‘as a running transformer of the external world’. His picture planes are, wrote Steinberg, ‘for the consciousness immersed in the brain of the city’.<sup>4</sup> As memos to the viewers, they document collective history, entrusting common images with the task of representing an age and its culture through exemplary objects. ‘The strongest thing about my work’, said Rauschenberg to Barbara Rose in 1966, ‘is the fact that I chose to ennoble the ordinary.’<sup>5</sup>

Rauschenberg referred to himself as an artist-reporter and to his work as ‘journalistic’.<sup>6</sup> ‘The imagery and the material and the meanings of the painting’, he said in an interview, ‘would be not an illustration of my will but more like an unbiased documentation of my observations. [...] I had to try consciously to do a work that would imply the kind of richness and complexity I saw around me.’ Items discarded on the street offered him the content he wanted for his Combines: ‘multiplicity and variation and inclusion’.<sup>7</sup> He could not, he said on another occasion, ‘design forms and colors that would achieve some preconceived result’ because he was ‘more interested in working WITH them than in their working with [him]’.<sup>8</sup> ‘The object itself’, he told Alain Sayag, ‘is dictating your possibilities.’<sup>9</sup> For Rauschenberg, an artwork was therefore the result of a non-hierarchical collaboration process – a collaboration, writes Sam Hunter, ‘among the various elements, between artist and, notably, between all of the above and viewers’.<sup>10</sup>

Given his premises and his self-conception as an objective author who refused to impose meanings onto things and did not want to ‘mess around with [his] subconscious’<sup>11</sup> but continuously reset the viewer’s perspective with his *perpetual inventory*,<sup>12</sup> Rauschenberg hardly appeared entitled to handle Dante in 1959. To many, his urban Combines were shocking, annoying, troubling. Was it serious art? Or was it a joke? What had Dante to do with all that? Why Dante?

Rauschenberg himself provided three different answers: (1) he wanted to be taken more seriously as an artist at that specific moment in his career;<sup>13</sup> (2) he wanted to test his recently discovered technique, the photographic transfer, by means of a series of drawings on a particular subject involving symbolism, and he was ‘looking around for a vehicle, something to keep them going’;<sup>14</sup> (3) he wanted to test his own aesthetics to see, he told Dorothy Gees Heckler, ‘if [he] was working abstractly because [he] couldn’t work any other way or whether [he] was doing it by choice’.<sup>15</sup> ‘I was trying to see if I was able to do narrative work, like Dante’s’, he explained to Barbara Rose.<sup>16</sup>

Whatever the spark that set the project in motion, we find Rauschenberg's reply to his detractors here: the refuse that crowded his Combines was no joke, nor was it there to undermine or deride high art in the spirit of Dada. With his collection of things, he was composing a new language, turning fragments – the ruins of his environment and culture – into emblems. And what is an emblem if not a composite figure, an assemblage of diverse fragments into a new unity and order? As such, it is an elusive visual allegory whose pictorial image tends to lose its consistency and become a sign open to interpretations; in it, the different narratives springing from its multiple nature come together and give birth to a polysemic language. It is with this language, abstract and referential at the same time, that Rauschenberg *translates* Dante's poem and makes it *new* by linking it to something in existence, present in the viewer's reality of mechanically reproduced images. By choosing 'to ennoble the ordinary', he, perhaps unconsciously, became the hermeneutist of his age and gave durability to what was trivial and precarious.

Let me shift perspective for a moment and focus on the reception of Dante in the United States around 1960. The Jewish emigration from Europe during the Nazi regime had brought two eminent Dante scholars to America, Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer, who, in the 1950s, were teaching at Yale University and at Johns Hopkins University respectively.<sup>17</sup> Their scholarship, and that of Charles Singleton at Harvard, marked an important new phase in Dante studies in America whose effects could also be seen in the publication of seven new translations of the *Comedy* between 1953 and 1958, including John Ciardi's *The Inferno*, which Rauschenberg used.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, a new generation of writers was then bringing the 'relationship between the medieval inferno and modern life'<sup>19</sup> established by the modernists a step forward. The American metamorphosis of the *Commedia* – and of the *Inferno* specifically – which Longfellow had set in motion was then reaching a sort of completion. Dante's book, in its totality, had become familiar, a ready-made backdrop or stage on which to enact original narratives, making its rich reservoir of images and situations coincide with American life and personal poetics. Their names were Robert Lowell, Robert Duncan, James Merrill, and LeRoy Jones – authors who had become involved with Dante and who were, or were to be, prominent in the cultural scene in those years. It was with this generation of writers, who studied his texts, borrowed his words and images to construct new circuits of

meaning, that America rediscovered Dante for the second time in the twentieth century.

Since he was looking around for a 'vehicle' for his series of transfer-drawings on a specific subject involving symbolism, the *Inferno* was then a predictable choice for Rauschenberg.<sup>20</sup> His friendship with Michael Sonnabend, a Dante scholar and the future husband of the patron of avant-garde art Ileana Sonnabend, must have also influenced his decision. Certainly, Sonnabend became his Dante consultant throughout his work on the illustrations and wrote a guideline of the thirty-four cantos for him, a commentary which often coincides with the artist's visual interpretation.<sup>21</sup> The question 'why Dante?' should, then, be reformulated, as does Bitete Vinklers, who titles her study of these drawings 'Why not Dante?'.<sup>22</sup> The composer John Cage says it better in a 1961 article on Rauschenberg's art and his use of 'things just as they are', 'things we already have'. 'Perhaps', writes Cage, 'he chose Dante because we have had it around so long so close to us without bothering to put it to use, which becomes its meaning.'<sup>23</sup>

As nonchalant as they are, these words touch on a crucial point: Dante – a metonymical term primarily referring to the *Inferno* in the United States – is ingrained, embedded historically in American culture, and it is this embeddedness, availability, and multiple potentialities that give it meaning. One might say that Dante belongs to American cultural mythology, the kind of modern mythology that Roland Barthes theorized in his 1957 essay, 'Myth Today'. It is a very famous essay, but let me briefly recall its general outline. Barthes says that a myth is a language, a message, but within a secondary semiological system. Its signifier – which Barthes calls its 'form' – is made up of material already processed in a previous semiological chain. Thus it carries a meaning along with a story, a past, a set of values, an order of facts, ideas, and decisions. And yet, it is also an empty container whose sense is held in suspension, at a distance, as a rich reservoir at the disposal of the signified, which Barthes calls 'concept'. Once the concept, which is always contingent and historical, takes possession of the form of a myth, its implicit, latent story fully re-emerges and again becomes historically functional. A new narrative is thus born, nourished by the old one, which appears 'deformed', metamorphosed into something else.<sup>24</sup>

This mechanism also underlies Rauschenberg's *Inferno*. Contemporary poet Charles Wright defines Dante's presence in his own poetry as a 'glittering sediment' running under American culture.<sup>25</sup> That 'glit-

tering sediment' re-emerges in Rauschenberg's drawings, and a classic text is 'put to use' once again, transformed by the historical language of America in the late 1950s. But, in the artist's own terms, taking possession means handling even a monument of European literature just like any other subject on his heterogeneous palette – one more piece of material with which to collaborate, added to his vocabulary of stuffed animals, waste material, and operating radios. If, for Rauschenberg, as John Cage tells us, '*any incentive to paint is as good as any other*', Dante was 'an incentive, providing multiplicity, as useful as a chicken or an old shirt'.<sup>26</sup> As such, it dictates 'your possibilities'. But the challenge this time was to work with a preconceived narrative that had reached American postmodernity already processed, in Barthes's sense, as a paradigm for picturing the 'inferno of modern life'.

Let us now examine Rauschenberg's Dante as illustrated in the artist's typical visual language. Since he wanted all his works, whatever happened in the studio, 'to look more like what was going on outside the window',<sup>27</sup> his *Inferno* borrowed material from current events covered by the media in those years. The passage of external elements from the window to the artist's studio was made through a technique of his invention – the photographic transfer. This technique consisted in moistening images from a magazine or a newsprint page with a solvent; they were then placed face down on a white sheet and rubbed with a dry ball point pen. The pressure of the rubbing transferred the ink from the image onto the blank paper, but in reverse, producing a blurred mirror effect. An overlay of watercolours and pencil marks was then added to create connections, different moods, emotional states, or to highlight a specific effect. Art critic Dore Ashton, who wrote a commentary to Rauschenberg's *Inferno* for a deluxe edition of the thirty-four drawings published in 1964,<sup>28</sup> recalls the many hours spent with him in his studio gazing at these plates and commenting on them while reading Ciardi's translation. To her, the Dante pieces are simulations of the collage technique – a pseudo-collage on a pseudo-drawing. He no longer adds, she writes, 'bits of real paper, cloth, fur but he appears to be doing so. Double, triple, quadruple illusions.' In this way he achieves 'the equivalent of the mirror image [...] seen in reverse and dimmed [...] not exactly what it was and yet, carries the thought of the reality inexorably.' Just as Dante's journey and the architectural constructions of the *Inferno*, she continues, 'can never be accurately graphed because they are imaginative, not logical, and intentionally compound illusion, so Rauschen-

berg's allusion to the virtual can never be seized virtually.<sup>29</sup> Once again, John Cage coined a catchy expression for Rauschenberg's transfer technique: 'a duplication containing duplications'<sup>30</sup> – its original, the photographic film, being, in turn, a mechanical reproduction of images widely circulating in reality and familiar to the viewer's eye.

In fact, in Rauschenberg's iconography we find references to two major media events in 1960 – the Olympic games and the presidential elections – alluded to in the illustrations through pictures of athletes and politicians. Let us take, for example, the image that Rauschenberg most frequently uses to portray Dante, which first appears in his transfer drawing for *Canto II*.<sup>31</sup> [Fig. 4, p. 371]

It comes from an advertisement published in numerous 1958 and 1959 issues of *Sports Illustrated*.<sup>32</sup> It publicized a brand of golf shafts fit for a wide variety of body types, manufactured according to anatomical specifications and capable of making you play 'the game that's in you' because, we read, they were 'the right PRO FIT shafts for your build, your height, your swing'. The series of body shapes it featured must have caught Rauschenberg's attention since it provided unity in difference: a figurine in various sizes he could use for representing Dante's different moods and roles throughout the *Inferno*. There is also a clear sexual or homoerotic element in this semi-nude male image which might have influenced Rauschenberg's choice, and which complicates even further our interpretation of his Dante's search for salvation through Beatrice and his relationship with Virgil.<sup>33</sup> In any case, it was a popular visual counterpart for the American Everyman – a towel-clad would-be athlete, standing immobile against a graph or a measuring chart as if his physical fitness were being examined in advance of his descent into the arena. Rauschenberg himself justified his choice by saying that it was 'the most neutral popular image [he] could find on that scale',<sup>34</sup> which, 'pictured in this way [would] be removed from any specific time and place'.<sup>35</sup> It is precisely by matching such a neutral image with that of the pilgrim Dante that a specific strategy develops: neutrality is actually erased and is replaced by a text laden with connotations that imposes its own narrative and offers viewers a perspective from which to read and interpret their own age. And here, in *Canto II*, the artist also achieves textual accuracy. By representing his Dante as alone, naked in all his vulnerability, in the first panel of this tripartite tableau, he manages to capture Dante's emphasis in lines 3–6: 'e io sol uno | m'apparecchiava a sostener la guerra | sì del cammino e sì della pietate, | che ritrarrà la

mente che non erra'.<sup>36</sup> The pilgrim's fears and doubts are conveyed by the bird next to this figure, which is flying in the opposite direction from 'lo cammino alto e silvestro', out of the illustration.

Sports supply most of the imagery for Rauschenberg's transfers. Athletes engaged in physical activities provide him with a stylistic device for mapping Dante and Virgil's journey through hell, for suggesting movement, or for picturing the characters' actions. In *Canto XV*, for example, an athlete running gives visual form to Dante's simile in the famous final lines in which Ser Brunetto, running to rejoin his band, is compared to the winning runner for the green cloth in Verona.<sup>37</sup>

The Giants in *Canto XXXI* are represented by Olympic weightlifters on the winners' platform with the Olympic rings underneath them. As Bibite Vinklers argues, images of athletes in action also serve to create a contrast between Virgil's active role in the *Inferno* and the static Dante, the mortal man belonging to history who accepts Virgil's guidance, aware of the insufficiency of his human powers.<sup>38</sup> In *Canto XIII*, for example, Virgil is in a baseball uniform engaged in action, while Dante stands immobile and perplexed in a city suit; in *Canto XVII* Virgil is a motorcyclist, his arms raised in a gesture of victory, while the static half-naked Dante stands behind him in fear of Geryon. Even when they are both dressed in sports garments, Virgil leads the way or is engaged in some action, as in *Canto XVIII*. Here they appear as skiers, but Virgil guides the descent into Malebolge. This is also a faithful illustration of lines 20–21 in *Inf. XVIII* (e 'l poeta l tenne a sinistra, e io dietro mi mossi'), yet somehow closer to Ciardi's colloquial and explicit language than to the original: 'My Guide kept to the left l and I walked after him'.<sup>39</sup> At several points we see Virgil in a space suit, another reference to his role as leader along the untrodden path of 'lo loco eterno'. In *Canto XXVI*, Virgil wears a frogman suit, an allusion to the diving into time in the Ulysses episode. The tripartite arrangement of this illustration creates a perspective that reproduces three levels of space and time: Dante and Virgil's conversation, Virgil's words to Ulysses, and Ulysses' narration.

Pictures relating to the industrial age (cranes, chimneys, derricks, smoggy scenes) and to technology (television screens, racing cars, rockets, spacemen) also abound. The *selva oscura* in *Canto I* is suggested by 'a forest of cranes', as Dore Ashton writes,<sup>40</sup> while a dark shape on the right recalls a nuclear mushroom cloud. In *Canto III*, Charon's boat is



an old rusty freighter, the gate of hell looks like a city tunnel, and the upper inscription seems to be a fragment of the name Coca-Cola.

Several figures recall the political events of the late 1950s. *Canto XII*, for example, incorporates the 1960 election campaign and Rauschenberg's own political stand: he makes Kennedy his Dante and makes the man of culture, the intellectual Adlai Stevenson, Virgil; Nixon, by contrast, appears in the river of boiling blood among those who are violent toward their neighbours. The racing cars stand for the centaurs, automatic pistols for their bows and arrows.

In sum, Rauschenberg composes his language out of exemplary images which, in turn, are 'forms', material already processed, synopses of old and new American myths from the founding fathers to consumerist and technological culture. Therefore, they carry a story with them: a set of values, ideas, and meanings – all duplications of duplications abstracted from their contexts to compose Rauschenberg's *emblemata*. Dore Ashton speaks of 'an art of quotations', 'bits and pieces of quotidian life', and visual citations 'from the art of the past' – an iconography made of 'archetypal symbols'.<sup>41</sup>

The Dante text that Rauschenberg used was also a duplication. Not knowing Italian, he was exposed to the *Inferno*, for the first time in his life, through Ciardi's translation, reading no more than two cantos ahead of the one he was illustrating. We also know that he consulted Henry W. Longfellow's and Dorothy L. Sayers's translations.<sup>42</sup> Above all, he relied on Michael Sonnabend's passion and his extensive knowledge of Dante's *Commedia*, as well as on the guideline to the *Inferno* Sonnabend had provided him.

The term *transfer* indicates then not only a technique, but also a series of aesthetic transformations across different languages, cultures, and media: from the medieval original to its English versions, from Dante's times to contemporary North America, from text to commentaries, from photo journalism to visual art, from word to image, from illustrations to the viewer's reception of them. As the etymology of the word 'transfer' indicates, Dante's work is literally carried from one location to another – each transference implying mutations, metamorphoses. It is interesting to note that in Dante we do not find the verb 'trasferire'; instead he uses 'tra(n)slare' or 'translatare', etymologically connected, like 'transfer', to the Latin verb 'transfere'. '[E] vidimi translato | sol con mia donna in più alta salute', says Dante in *Par.* XIV, 83–84, as he

moves from one level to another in an almost cinematographic process of transfiguration.

In this game of refractions, where does the author stand? What is Rauschenberg's overall approach to the *Inferno*? After completing six illustrations in 1959, he applied, unsuccessfully, for a Guggenheim Fellowship. In the project statement he attached to the application, now held in the Rauschenberg Studio in New York, he outlined the scope of the project:

I am making one illustration for each canto of the poem and each illustration is an attempt to evoke the spirit, moods and action of the entire canto, rather than to depict any particular incident which occurs in the poem. [...] The result seems to indicate a large and complex 'view' or 'scene', containing implications of activity and changes of movement from the literal to the figurative, from the general to the specific.<sup>43</sup>

Each drawing was then conceived as a frame in a large combine-drawing of thirty-four panels, a single poem on the epic of the American everyman following Dante's plot. 'In the canto', he said in an interview, 'the space allowed for each image was a measure made by the space occupied by the author's words, literally. (Not to exaggerate or edit). I was the reporter.'<sup>44</sup> He had seen Botticelli's illustrations of the *Comedy* and had liked them for their 'cartoon-like' quality.<sup>45</sup> And it is the cartoon technique that he approaches in his illustrations – not skipping events, avoiding personal emphasis, and reconstructing a chronological sequence in a linear way in each piece. Hence the development of devices to map the narrative and the development of a style that echoes, as has been noted, medieval miniaturists and medieval narrative paintings, and that adheres to Western habits of reading.<sup>46</sup>

Let us go back to *Canto II*: the narrative, here as in almost all the illustrations, unfurls from left to right, descending from the upper-left corner down to the lower-right corner so as to reproduce the funnel shape of hell. The illustrated story begins, as does the original, with Dante's hesitations and his desire to flee; it then progresses in the second section to Virgil's recollection of Beatrice's concern for Dante's salvation. A yellow spot marks Virgil's introduction to her speech in lines 55–57: 'Lucevan li occhi suoi più che la stella; l e cominciommi a dir soave e piana, l con angelica voce in sua favella'. She is as idealized as an ancient statue, standing at the top of a pyramid-like structure that suggests protection, and she points downward in the direction of

Dante's journey, as indicated by a heavy arrow. The arrow is a device Rauschenberg uses frequently to indicate the narrative sequence and visually represents the enjambment that links line to line and tercet to tercet in the original.<sup>47</sup> In the third section of this specific plate, Dante, reinvigorated by Virgil's speech, appears behind his 'duca', 'signore', and 'maestro', who is represented as a triumphant runner leading the race toward the lower-right corner of the drawing and into the next illustration. Some transfers include rectangles or vignettes, which narrate specific passages from the original. This is the case in *Canto XVII* where the usurers are represented within a green square, suggesting the dollar bill. Usually men in conservative clothes symbolize those who pursue material gain, conservative types, or politicians.

According to Dore Ashton, '[t]he principle of Rauschenberg's *Inferno* is movement (cinematic movement)', and 'being a modern artist, [he] takes montage for granted and uses countless juxtapositions to create new entities'.<sup>48</sup> John Cage first made the association between Rauschenberg's combine-drawings and television. 'It seems', he wrote, 'like many television sets working simultaneously all tuned differently [...] it's like looking out a window, but our windows have become electronic: everything moves through the point where our vision is focused; wait long enough and you'll get the Asiatic panoply.'<sup>49</sup> Cage's comment echoes what Rauschenberg wrote in 1959 to describe his project to the Guggenheim Fellowship committee:

[t]he 'look' of these illustrations falls loosely into that of contemporary United States abstract painting, perhaps, with a certain forward use of materials in evidence; and includes photographic aspects of contemporary life, modern dress, etc. The visual focus tends to be multiple, employing freedoms of scale and distances: near and far being presented simultaneously.<sup>50</sup>

By appropriating the 'far' (the medieval poem) through the 'near', his popular visual language, Rauschenberg, perhaps unconsciously, does what Dante did with Latin and sacred texts: he filters the *Inferno* through a vernacular language made of contemporary images and symbols so that Dante's text would become available to a wider readership. The author is himself a spectator of the film he has composed, making the 'far' overlap with the 'near'. In this montage, the new myths of twentieth-century American mass society take over from those of the founding fathers, as the illustration of Charon in *Canto III* suggests.

The face of 'il nocchier della livida palude' (in the second section of the plate, separated from the previous one by a white strip suggesting the river Acheron and the difference between the two worlds) is that of George Washington as he is depicted on the dollar bill. In Rauschenberg's illustration he ferries the souls of the damned on a sort of modern cargo boat, suggesting that consumerism has corrupted America's original values and condemned it to damnation. The *Comedy*, which was an aesthetic model in the nineteenth century, provides the postmodern American author with a paradigm for the decline of a culture, allowing him to represent, through Dante, the drama of its damnation and expiation.

In 1962 Rauschenberg proclaimed, in his own way, the death of the author:

I'd really like to think that the artist could be just another kind of material in the picture, working in collaboration with all the other materials. But of course I know that isn't possible, really. I know that the artist can't help exercising his control to a degree and that he makes all the decisions finally. But if I can just throw enough obstacles in the way of my personal taste than maybe it won't be *all*-controlling.<sup>51</sup>

One way to avoid control is to renounce authorship, letting objects and viewers interact directly. But Dante is hardly a neutral object, and by choosing him Rauschenberg put tradition 'to use' and created a dialogue with the viewer's world.

I believe that Rauschenberg's Dante phase, which lasted for about seven years, marked an apex in his career and suggests a new way to bridge the gap between tradition and postmodernity. I also believe that his illustrations looked forward to the third American discovery of Dante in the twentieth century. When in 1965 Rauschenberg was asked by the magazine *Life* to contribute to their December issue commemorating Dante's seven hundredth birthday, he accomplished a sort of American *Guernica* – a large transfer-drawing on silkscreen illustrating what was infernal in his country in those years. If it were not for the title added by the *Life* editors, 'A Modern Inferno', there would be no recognizable relation to Dante's text. Indeed, the first *cantica* is here a comprehensive sign whose original meaning has been diluted into historical, contingent, and personal concepts of evil and good. This is Rauschenberg's legacy for contemporary artists and writers: to have completed a Dantean trajectory that runs alongside American culture. It

does not bring salvation, but it is a screen through which everyday reality is filtered. Thus metamorphosed into an open sign, the *Commedia* still stands ready for today's artist, empty and full, as Roland Barthes would say.

## NOTES

- 1 For biographical information, I am mainly indebted to Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall* (New York: Penguin, 1980); the detailed 'Chronology' by Joan Young with Susan Davidson in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, ed. by Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1997), pp. 550–87; Sam Hunter, *Robert Rauschenberg: Works, Writings and Interviews* (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2006); and several interviews released by the artist over time.
- 2 Rosalind Krauss, 'Perpetual Inventory', in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, pp. 206–23 (pp. 217–18).
- 3 Rosalind Krauss, 'Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image', in *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. by Branden W. Joseph (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 52; originally published in *Artforum*, 13.4 (December 1974), pp. 36–43.
- 4 Here are Steinberg's comments on Rauschenberg's Combines as mental spaces in his *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 84: 'It seemed at times that Rauschenberg's work surface stood for the mind itself – dump, reservoir, switching center, abundant with concrete references freely associated as in an internal monologue – the outward symbol of the mind as a running transformer of the external world, constantly ingesting incoming unprocessed data to be mapped in an overcharged field.' On this fascinating approach to Rauschenberg's art, see also Krauss, 'Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image'.
- 5 Barbara Rose, *Rauschenberg* (New York: Vintage, 1987), p. 59. This book consists of a long interview with the artist.
- 6 Hunter, *Robert Rauschenberg*, p. 153.
- 7 'The Artist Speaks: Robert Rauschenberg', interview by Dorothy Gees Seckler, *Art in America*, 54.3 (May–June 1966), pp. 73–85 (p. 81).
- 8 Reported in Hunter, *Robert Rauschenberg*, p. 54.
- 9 'I don't necessarily desire a perfect photography'. Interview with Alain Sayag, in Hunter, *Robert Rauschenberg*, p. 151.
- 10 Hunter, *Robert Rauschenberg*, p. 55.
- 11 'The Artist Speaks', p. 76.
- 12 For this much used expression in Rauschenberg studies, see Rose, *Rauschenberg*, in which the artist recalls the anecdote from which it originated.
- 13 Reported in Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 157.
- 14 Quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelor* (New York: Penguin, 1962), p. 224.

- 15 'The Artist Speaks', p. 84. In 'Perpetual Inventory', p. 215, Krauss quotes another of Rauschenberg's comments on his Dante enterprise: 'Dante was sought and completed to have the adventure of what, and if, I could apply my abstract sensibility to a classical restricted assignment. A one-on-one handling and no embarrassment in either. Illustration with compulsive respect.'
- 16 Rose, *Rauschenberg*, p. 100.
- 17 A recent account of Dante scholarship in America during this time period is Giuseppe Mazzotta, 'Reflections on Dante Studies in America', *Dante Studies*, 118 (2000), pp. 323–30. See also Chapter II of Dante Della Terza, *Da Vienna a Baltimora: La diaspora degli intellettuali europei negli Stati Uniti d'America* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1987), pp. 37–52.
- 18 Four of them were new prose or verse translations of the entire poem: *The Divine Comedy*, A New Prose Translation, trans. by H.R. Huse (New York: Rinehart, 1954); *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Thomas Goddard Bergin (New York: Appleton Century Crafts, 1955); *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: A Translation in Terza Rima*, trans. by Glen L. Swiggett (Sewanee, TN: University Press of the University of the South, 1956); *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, trans. by Mary Prentice Lillie (San Francisco: Grabbon Press, 1958). Three were translations of single *cantiche*: *La Divina Commedia*, trans. by Harry Morgan Ayres, vol. II, *Purgatorio* and vol. III, *Paradiso* (New York: Vanni, 1953); *The Inferno*, trans. by John Ciardi (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1954); *Purgatory*, trans. by Dorothy L. Sayers (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1955). Moreover, in 1955, a deluxe limited edition of *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: The Prose Translation by Charles Eliot Norton with Illustrations from Designs by Botticelli* was issued in New York by Bruce Rogers and The Press A. Colish. In 1957 two translations of *La Vita Nuova* went to press: the unpublished version of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Vita Nuova*, edited by Joseph Chelsey Mathews for the *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 9 (1957), pp. 208–44 and pp. 346–62, and Mark Musa's *La Vita Nuova* for Rutgers University Press. This wealth of Dante translations in these years included also three versions of *De Monarchia*.
- 19 These well-known words by T.S. Eliot come from his 'What Dante Means to Me', in *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), p. 128.
- 20 In Young and Davidson, 'Chronology', p. 556, we read that the project had been originally suggested to Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Knox Martin by Theresa Eagan, the wife of the New York gallerist Charles Eagan.
- 21 The original text has been lost, but the short résumé on each label that accompanied the drawings in the 1964 MoMa exhibition of Rauschenberg's *Inferno* was quite likely based on Sonnabend's *Inferno* guideline. This is the view of Antonio Homem, who has kindly shared with me his memories of Rauschenberg's long friendship with Ileana and Michael Sonnabend. The label texts are preserved at the Rauschenberg Studio. My reading of the drawings is indebted to these comments and to Dore Ashton's commentary in the Abrams edition of Rauschenberg's *Inferno*.

- 22 Bitite Vincklers, 'Why Not Dante? A Study of Rauschenberg's Drawing for the *Inferno*', *Art International*, 12.6 (Summer 1968), pp. 99–106.
- 23 John Cage, 'On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work', in *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 103.
- 24 Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today', in *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), pp. 109–59.
- 25 Charles Wright, 'Dantino Mio', in *The Poets' Dante*, ed. by Peter S. Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. 261.
- 26 Cage, 'On Robert Rauschenberg', p. 99.
- 27 Reported in Krauss, 'Perpetual Inventory', p. 220, and originally quoted in Paul Taylor, 'Robert Rauschenberg', *Interview* (New York) 20.12 (December 1990), p. 147.
- 28 *Rauschenberg's XXXIV Drawings for Dante's Inferno*, ed. by Dore Ashton (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1964). Each of the 300 boxed sets signed by the author included one original lithograph selected from a series of seven printed especially for this album. Their titles were all monosyllabic: Plank, Mark, Sink, Ark, Kar, Rank, and Prize.
- 29 Dore Ashton, 'Thirty-four illustrations for Dante's *Inferno*', *METRO*, 2 (May 1961), p. 59.
- 30 Cage, 'On Robert Rauschenberg', p. 102.
- 31 The thirty-four transfer drawings were anonymously donated to MoMa in 1963.
- 32 These ads can be seen in *Sports Illustrated*, 20.8 (May 1958), pp. 10–11 at <<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/cover/featured/7564/index.htm>> [accessed on 9 August 2010].
- 33 Laura Auricchio discusses this image in terms of its sexual innuendos and links it to the homoerotic imagery of the 1950s in 'Lifting the Veil: Robert Rauschenberg's Thirty Four Illustrations for Dante's *Inferno* and the Commercial Homoerotic Imagery of the 1950s America', in *The Gay 90s: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary in Queer Studies*, ed. by Thomas Forster, Carol Siegel, and Ellen E. Berry (special issue of *Gender*, 26 (1997)), pp. 119–55.
- 34 Quoted in Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 158.
- 35 Quoted in Auricchio, 'Lifting the Veil', p. 127.
- 36 Quotations from Dante's *Commedia* are taken from Anna Maria Leonardi Chia-vacci's edition (Milan: Mondadori, 1991–97).
- 37 Rauschenberg is using here a picture of Rafer Johnson, a decathlete who was named *Sports Illustrated's* Sportsman of the Year in 1958, and won the gold medal at the 1960 Rome Olympics. The popularity of Rauschenberg's 'actors', whose public and private actions filled up columns in sport tabloids, added another narrative layer to the illustrations, which must have played a considerable role in contemporary viewers' response to this work.
- 38 Vincklers, 'Why Not Dante?', pp. 102–03.
- 39 All English quotations of Dante's first *cantica* come from *The Inferno*, trans. by John Ciardi (see note 18 above), which marked the first attempt in the United States to render Dante's work in idiomatic, colloquial English.

- 40 Ashton, *XXXIV Drawings for Dante's Inferno*, plate 1.
- 41 Ashton, 'Thirty-four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno', pp. 56 and 53.
- 42 Reported in Tompkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 158
- 43 Courtesy of the Rauschenberg Studio.
- 44 Krauss, 'Perpetual Inventory', p. 215.
- 45 Quoted in Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 158.
- 46 On the relationship of Rauschenberg's drawings to medieval miniatures and illuminated books see Karl Fugelso, 'Robert Rauschenberg's *Inferno* Illuminations', *Studies in Medievalism*, 13 (2004), pp. 47–66.
- 47 Other devices are numbers, letters, and images of eyes, ears, hands, and arms. Racing cars often suggest noise.
- 48 Ashton, 'Thirty-four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno', p. 54.
- 49 Cage, 'On Robert Rauschenberg', p. 106.
- 50 Courtesy of the Rauschenberg Studio.
- 51 Quoted in Vincklers, 'Why Not Dante?', p. 99.



Antonella Francini, 'Transferring Dante: Robert Rauschenberg's Thirty-Four Illustrations for the *Inferno*', in *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart, *Cultural Inquiry*, 2 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2011), pp. 323–37 <[https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-02\\_19](https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-02_19)>

## REFERENCES

- Alighieri, Dante, *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, trans. by Mary Prentice Lillie (San Francisco: Grabbon Press, 1958)
- *La Divina Commedia*, trans. by Harry Morgan Ayres (New York: Vanni, 1953)
- *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: A Translation in Terza Rima*, trans. by Glen L. Swiggett (Sewanee, TN: University Press of the University of the South, 1956)
- *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Thomas Goddard Bergin (New York: Appleton Century Crafts, 1955)
- *The Divine Comedy: A New Prose Translation*, trans. by H.R. Huse (New York: Rinehart, 1954)
- *The Inferno*, trans. by John Ciardi (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1954)
- *Purgatory*, trans. by Dorothy L. Sayers (Baltimore: Penguin, 1955)
- Ashton, Dore, *Rauschenberg's XXXIV Drawings for Dante's Inferno* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1964)
- 'Thirty-four illustrations for Dante's Inferno', *METRO*, 2 (May 1961), pp. 52–61
- Auricchio, Laura, 'Lifting the Veil: Robert Rauschenberg's Thirty Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno and the Commercial Homoerotic Imagery of the 1950s America', in *The Gay 90s: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary in Queer Studies*, ed. by Thomas Forster, Carol Siegel and Ellen E. Berry, special issue of *Gender*, 26 (1997), pp. 119–55
- Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972)
- Cage, John, 'On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work', in *Silence* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), pp. 98–108
- Eliot, Thomas S., 'What Dante Means to Me', in *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965)
- Fugelso, Karl, 'Robert Rauschenberg's *Inferno* Illuminations', *Studies in Medievalism*, 13 (2004), pp. 47–66
- Hawkins, Peter S., and Rachel Jacoff, eds., *The Poets' Dante: Twentieth Century Reflections* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001)
- Hunter, Sam, *Robert Rauschenberg: Works, Writings and Interviews* (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2006)
- Krauss, Rosalind, 'Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image', *Artforum*, 13.4 (December 1974), pp. 36–43, repr. in *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. by Branden W. Joseph (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 39–56
- Rose, Barbara, *Rauschenberg* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987)
- Seckler, Dorothy Gees, 'The Artist Speaks: Robert Rauschenberg', *Art in America*, 54.3 (May–June 1966), pp. 73–85
- Steinberg, Leo, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972)
- Taylor, Paul, 'Robert Rauschenberg', *Interview* (New York) 20.12 (December 1990), p. 147

- Terza, Dante Della, *Da Vienna a Baltimora: La diaspora degli intellettuali europei negli Stati Uniti d'America* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1987)
- Tomkins, Calvin, *The Bride and the Bachelor* (New York: Penguin, 1962)
- *Off the Wall* (New York: Penguin, 1980)
- Vincklers, Bitite, 'Why Not Dante? A Study of Rauschenberg's Drawings for the *Inferno*', *Art International*, 12.6 (Summer 1968), pp. 99–106
- Wright, Charles, 'Dantino Mio', in *The Poets' Dante*, ed. by Peter S. Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), pp. 259–64
- Young, Joan, 'Chronology' in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Restrospective*, ed. by Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1997), pp. 550–87